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Reinvention and Disruption: Austin's Immigrant Taxi Drivers in the Age of Uber

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Reinvention and Disruption: Austin's Immigrant Taxi Drivers in the Age of Uber

by

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Dedication

To Crown & Anchor Pub, where everyone knows your name, and to #kelby, for reading every draft.

Abstract

Reinvention and Disruption: Austin's Immigrant Taxi Drivers in the Age of Uber

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Abstract: Desalegn Gemechu and Elsabet Guangul are musicians from Ethiopia who came to the United States for a better life — and now, Gemechu drives a cab. The taxi industry has long served as an important steppingstone for immigrants like Gemechu trying to rebuild a life in a foreign country. But since Uber and Lyft flooded the market and pushed down industry wages, even the workers' cooperative — an attempt by immigrant drivers to save their livelihood through a low-cost, democratically run taxi franchise — is struggling. As Gemechu and Guangul look to the future, they're resolute about their decision to come to the U.S., but at a loss for how they'll cope with an industry that is slipping away.

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On a muggy July afternoon, Desalegn Gemechu was waiting in a long line of bright green taxicabs at Austin-Bergstrom International Airport. He was chatting about Ethiopian pop music — of which he is an expert — as he inched slowly toward the front of the queue. He paused every now and then to shout a greeting out his window to a fellow driver in Amharic, his native language, usually followed by a burst of laughter.

For up to three hours a day, every day, Gemechu sits in that line, waiting for a fare, a testament to the fierce competition from Uber and other ride-hailing apps over the past few years. Oftentimes it means taxi drivers will choose to wait at the airport where they can count on a steady flow of travelers, at least some of whom still choose to hop in a cab rather than reach for their iPhones to request an Uber or Lyft.

Twenty years ago as a boy in elementary school, Gemechu got up each morning before dawn to help his mother collect firewood from a forest outside his hometown of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital city. After school, he'd help sell the firewood. "I am really from a very poor family," Gemechu explained. "When I say poor, you don't know what I mean by poor." Things were so bad at one point, Gemechu said, that his parents had to put his 5-year-old brother up for adoption.

It was his family's poverty that motivated Gemechu to apply for a green card through the State Department's Diversity Visa program, which randomly selects 55,000 eligible applicants for permanent U.S. residency out of a pool of up to 15 million. As a taxi driver, Gemechu can send between $150 and $250 per month back to his family — and that goes a long way in Ethiopia, where the average annual income is $783.

"For us, America is equivalent to heaven," Gemechu said. "So I was like, Okay, I need a better life. Not only for me, actually, it was for my family. My mom, especially. So when I won the lottery it was a kind of blessing from God."

Gemechu is one of over a million people that come to the United States each year seeking work — not only as a source of a much-needed income, but as a vehicle for establishing a permanent and productive life in an adopted homeland.

Gemechu and his wife, Elsabet Guangul, arrived in Austin, Texas, in April 2011. With the help of an aunt who'd moved there a few years earlier, the couple situated themselves in an East Austin apartment and Gemechu found work as a dishwasher at Flix Brewhouse, a movie theater and brewery in suburban Round Rock. Though he has an associate's degree in general mechanics and a bachelor's degree in music education, he discovered the language barrier made using his skills impossible. After a few months washing dishes, he got a housekeeping job at a hospital. That job was difficult for him, he said. "It's very discouraging. They disrespect you so bad. You can handle it maybe a year."

Frustrated with his job prospects and struggling to acclimate to Texas culture and Austin's humidity ("I was thinking I was dying!"), Gemechu was ready for a change when a friend suggested taxi driving. In 2013, he started driving for Austin Cab, one of the three cab companies then operating in the city. For the first time since moving to the United States, Gemechu was making relatively good money, had a flexible schedule and was — for most of the day — his own boss. After a few months at Austin Cab, he moved to Lone Star Cab, where the path to car ownership was shorter. And in 2016, when ATX Coop Taxi formed as a workers' cooperative, he jumped at the opportunity to join. In contrast to the private franchises that charge drivers nearly $500 in weekly fees, ATX Coop Taxi would cut fees and include all members in decision-making.

"Driving for franchise companies, you are the main source of income for them but they treat you the worst," said Gemechu at the ATX Coop Taxi headquarters in North Austin, where he now serves on the company's board.

Started in the fall of 2016 by a little over a dozen drivers from Austin's taxi union, the Taxi Driver Association of Austin, the founders saw the cooperative as a way to remake the industry to better serve their needs. "Drivers were feeling that they were getting treated very disrespectfully," said Dawit Abeza, the co-op's head of technology operations. "Their ideas and thoughts didn't matter." The co-op cut weekly drivers' fees by more than half, and puts every major decision to a vote. "In the co-op, you are the one fighting for yourself," said Gemechu.

And for a while, it worked — business was good, and drivers at the cooperative felt heard. But then, in May 2017, Uber and Lyft came back to town.

The ride-hail giants had been gone for a year. The Austin population was unwilling to vote down a 2016 referendum that Uber and Lyft opposed, which required drivers for ride-hailing apps to be fingerprinted in the same way taxi drivers are. But when their campaign failed, the ride-hail companies just redirected their lobbying efforts to the state capitol and Texas legislators rewarded them with House Bill 100. The bill put "personal vehicles" that are used in the ride-hail business model under state — not city – – jurisdiction in Texas. In the year following their return, the taxi industry in Texas' capital took a 70 percent hit in ridership.

"Uber and Lyft, they killed us," Gemechu said. "They pay lower than minimum wage, and that is big, big, corruption for me."

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Gemechu's story is emblematic of new immigrants in the United States, especially those who end up in the taxi industry. Chasing the American Dream, a combination of determination, hard work, intelligence and luck lands people like Gemechu in the very place they fantasized about — only to find that their skills aren't appreciated, and they're relegated to a low status. Still, the value of the American dollars

sent back home makes it hard to give up even the entry-level jobs that immigrants are often wildly overqualified for. Driving taxis provides a needed steppingstone for many immigrants — a job where long hours pay off and family obligations can still be met.

Taxi driving has held this unique position for immigrants for decades, in cities all over the country. The barrier to entry is relatively low — franchises offer financing options for drivers to purchase their vehicles — and the flexible schedule allows drivers to help with childcare and work overtime whenever necessary. A 2010 study of the Austin taxi industry reported that 63 percent of Austin drivers were not born in the United States — at ATX Coop Taxi, that number's close to 100. "It's very convenient for an immigrant," said Nega Taddesse, one of the ATX Coop Taxi founders. "If the wife is working, and one of you has to take care of the kids, the taxi driver is very flexible."

Upon arrival, said Taddesse, many immigrant families lack the network and resources for childcare while financial realities necessitate two incomes. Driving allows one parent to jockey their schedule around sick kids, doctor appointments and school meetings — a level of flexibility uncommon in low-skill, entry-level jobs. The network that immigrant drivers create within the industry also becomes a community from which to draw social capital — an "ethnic economy," as UCLA sociologist Ivan Light describes it, that can support new Americans as they navigate the transition to life in the United States.

But what happens when this steppingstone sinks back below the surface? Ride-hailing apps are pushing prices down to a wage that's nowhere near the level that drivers previously relied on. While Austin taxi drivers say they could make as much as $25 per hour on a good day in the absence of Uber and Lyft, $12 per hour is lucky since their return. The best estimates for ride-hailing apps put the drivers' hourly rate between $8 and $10.

Part of the reason that ride-hail drivers tolerate lower wages is that most don't rely on it as their main source of income. According to a 2015 report from Princeton that was co-authored by Uber's Jonathan Hall, 81 percent of Uber drivers are on the road for less than 34 hours a week. In contrast, 81 percent of taxis drive more than 34 hours per week — and a full 35 percent of taxis clock in at over 50 hours.

Uber and Lyft have consistently claimed that their drivers earn much more than the drivers themselves report, with ads boasting $25 per hour — but the companies have failed to release comprehensive data. Last year, Uber paid $20 million to settle a lawsuit with the Federal Trade Commission for misleading drivers on how much they could earn.

For the founders, ATX Coop Taxi was supposed to rescue drivers in the industry. But the ride-hailing revolution has taken a toll on their incomes and their cooperative — the stress of a shrinking market has created internal divisions within ATX Coop Taxi itself. It's hard enough to create and maintain a business with a democratic leadership structure when business is good; it's even harder when your market share is diminishing by the day.

Without really realizing it, ATX Coop's immigrant drivers boarded a sinking ship — if it goes under, what happens to the taxi drivers who invested everything in an industry that can no longer support them? And what happens to the industry's drivers all over the U.S. who are also facing a loss of livelihood in the face of the ride-hail takeover?

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On June 28, the president of ATX Coop Taxi addressed the Austin City Council: "My name is High Chief Innocent Njoku." Born in eastern Nigeria, Njoku moved to Austin 37 years ago. His title — High Chief — is an Igbo political designation that he received in his hometown. He's been president of the cooperative since the "emergency elections" early this year when members ousted the previous board for lack of leadership

and rumors of corruption. The council was voting to "deregulate" the taxi industry — meaning that fares would be set by the individual franchises rather than the city, and that many outdated regulations would be dropped. Njoku adjusted his glasses and looked down at his prepared remarks, 11 pairs of eyes watching him from the dais.

Njoku introduced ATX Coop Taxi as a company owned by an underprivileged minority population of "98 percent foreigners who are your neighbors, friends, taxpayers, volunteers, parents who strive to put food on the table for their families." But that's become nearly impossible since the reintroduction of Uber and Lyft into the market last May. The cooperative has witnessed "devastating effects on our members" since then, said Njoku. From an all-time high of over 500 members, it's down to just 330. "Their presence has cost our business a loss of up to 75 percent, if not more," he said, leaving drivers and their families on the brink of financial disaster.

But the meeting wasn't about regulating Uber and Lyft, over which the Austin City Council has no power. It was about deregulating the industry in an attempt to give taxis more ways to compete.

According to Njoku, drivers at ATX Coop Taxi were split on many parts of the ordinance, like removing the mandate for a top light and uniform paint jobs. To make a car compliant, he pointed out, was expensive. And drilling holes in the roof of a car to install a light devalues it.

Njoku finished and Mayor Steve Adler called the next speaker in a tired voice. Another ATX Coop Taxi driver, Mukul Siddique, hurried to the microphone. "I strongly oppose having to allow no fare minimum or maximum," said Siddique. The driver expressed concern for his regular customers — especially the handicapped and elderly — who rely on the predictability of rates for hospital visits or grocery runs. "Imagine it's

rush hour or it's one of our highest traffic festival days," said Siddique. "They cannot afford surge pricing which may be running triple or quadruple the regular price."

Echoing a fear voiced by many other drivers, Siddique worried that the deregulation of taxi rates would create a "race to the bottom" between franchises as they compete for the lowest fare. The fluctuations would eliminate the predictability that customers value breaking down trust between drivers and customers.

Siddique was also opposed to eliminating the top light and color uniformity requirements, fearing that low visibility would decrease business. He finished with an appeal as the three-minute timer buzzed: "Mr. Mayor and all other councilmembers, please oppose these new measures, oppose these changes, oppose this deregulation which will not be any benefit to your citizens or to your taxi drivers like me."

Robert Spillar, Austin's transportation director, took the podium to defend the changes. The goal, he said, was "to give them the best ability to compete" by giving taxi franchises control over their rates and eliminating regulations that require unnecessary overhead costs. If that benefit is passed on to the drivers, said Spillar, they should be able to compete with Uber and Lyft while maintaining a "livable wage."

The deregulation ordinance passed unanimously and went into effect 10 days later.

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The lack of agreement between Njoku and Siddique in back-to-back testimonies at the city council meeting demonstrates the complicated nature of these changes. Even among drivers within ATX Coop Taxi, opinions on what's best for the industry fall all along the spectrum. Some feel that regulating Uber and Lyft — however unattainable that goal may be — is the only way to save taxis.

Others feel that ride-hailing apps have improved certain aspects of the business that should be adopted by taxis. But while they all have different ideas about what should happen now, most of them just want it to go back to being the reliable steppingstone that it was before the disruptors arrived.

Spillar, the head of the team that wrote the new ordinance, believes giving taxi franchises more room to evolve will only help create more competitive and efficient options. And some of the changes will save the franchises money. But can it ever be enough to compete with the apps and pay a "livable wage?"

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As president of the Taxi Driver Association of Austin, Dave Passmore was integral to the decade of lobbying for ATX Coop Taxi's creation. The union had to convince the Austin City Council to approve the formation of a new franchise and permits for the cabs. When Uber and Lyft left the city in May 2016, there was finally an opening. The two ride-hailing companies had teamed up on an $8.6 million campaign in opposition to the council regulations, which were put to a vote in a citywide referendum. Uber and Lyft promised to leave the city if they didn't get their way, and so they did. The referendum passed, and Uber and Lyft simply redirected their lobbying efforts to the state government. But the gap in service that the companies left helped the TDAA's cause.

The Council officially okayed the creation of ATX Coop Taxi on Oct. 7, 2016, on the grounds that it was serving drivers in a way that privately owned franchises weren't by putting member drivers first. The goal, said co-founder Nega Taddesse, was "protecting this industry that is very, very helpful to immigrants. This is a convenient job."

The founders knew that the threat of the ride-hailing apps wasn't gone with the departure of Uber and Lyft. By cutting unnecessary overhead costs, they hoped to save

their jobs in the face of the ride-hail apps. “The co-op was the only viable solution for the drivers to stay in the industry and make a living,” said Passmore. Twelve smaller companies willing to abide by the fingerprinting rule cropped up in the city. But without the name recognition or streamlined apps, they couldn’t compete as well with the taxis.

ATX Coop Taxi grew fast — starting with just 30 drivers, it had over 500 by the following year. Drivers, many from Yellow Cab, the city’s largest franchise, were drawn to the lower weekly fees (ATX charges less than half of what Yellow did) and the chance to participate in the decision-making process.

But in May 2017, House Bill 100 was passed, and Uber and Lyft announced their return to Austin. At the signing ceremony, Texas Governor Greg Abbott declared: “This is freedom for every Texan — especially those who live in the Austin area — to be able to choose the provider of their choice as it concerns transportation.” Lyft’s spokesperson, Chelsea Harrison, claimed that the bill created “expanded earning opportunities for Texans.”

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In a 2017 study that analyzed the “Uber effect” in several U.S. cities (not including Austin), University of Oxford researchers found that hourly incomes for taxi drivers decreased by an average of 10 percent after Uber arrived. Taxi drivers also worked longer hours to make up for the loss. Though comprehensive data isn’t available for Austin in recent years, drivers say they’ve lost at least that much in income. Some say they’re making less than half of what they did before the ride-hailing apps.

The stress of this blow to taxi drivers led to divisions within ATX Coop Taxi at the beginning of this year. Members accused the board of mismanagement, and called for “emergency elections,” held in February. Hassan Aruri, one of the original founders, said he was “heartbroken” when he was asked to step down.

“Everything that we have worked for to bring fairness and justice to everyone,” said Aruri, “did not turn out to be that way.” Most of the original founders left the cooperative after the board re-elections, feeling rejected by those they were trying to serve. Dave Passmore sold his house and left Austin altogether. He now lives in South Texas, said Aruri. Aruri blamed religious and ethnic divisions for much of the dysfunction at ATX Coop Taxi — specifically the breakdowns between Christian and Muslim drivers from Africa. “Everybody listened to what their group was saying,” he said. “They ganged up against the board of Muslims and removed us.”

Gemechu didn’t perceive the shake-up as a problem of religious or ethnic division, though he acknowledges that the new board is entirely Christian. Still, he saw the mistrust breeding from inconsistent leadership and anxiety among members facing decreasing incomes. As a new board member, he feels the same pressure to fix the unfixable. “You are helping them for free, and they give you really, really hard time,” he said.

The cooperative was 10 years in the making — and now Aruri is starting over. He’s cobbling together side jobs driving nonemergency medical transport vehicles, and sometimes driving for the apps. When asked which ones, he replied: “I don’t want to talk about that.”

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Gemechu and his wife met as musicians in the Ethiopian Air Force. As part of the military branch’s drama department, Gemechu was a bandleader and Guangul a singer. They have a small studio in their home for recording and playing. Gemechu often gets asked to play backup for Ethiopian pop stars when they’re in Texas, and that’s when he’s truly using his talents. “I have to forget everything, just focus on the music in this moment,” he said. “I don’t worry. My hands are really as free as birds.”

Guangul still sings, too. One of her songs got a lot of traction in Ethiopia, Gemechu said. “She’s not really famous,” he said, “but in her local area — yes.” In July, they played the Taste of Africa festival in Killeen, Texas. That’s the real dream, Gemechu said, but those opportunities would never be consistent enough to support a family. “You enjoy with the rest of the community,” Gemechu said, describing the events they’ve been able to play in Texas. “All Ethiopians from all directions will come and just enjoy that festival.”

Underemployment is another way that Gemechu and Guangul are representative of a large number of immigrants — especially those who come to the United States on a Diversity Visa. Many believe taxi drivers only have the job because they’re unqualified for any other — even Dr. Kara Kockelman, a transportation expert and engineer and the University of Texas at Austin, opined that “they must just not be very smart” to stay in the industry. But many drivers are, if anything, exceptionally over-qualified; the Diversity Visa program, which brought many of them to the U.S., requires applicants to prove they have at least two years of post-high school education in order to be eligible at all. Gemechu has two degrees; Passmore has a mechanical and electrical engineering certificate; the cooperative’s vice president Tebkew Mulatu was a chemical engineer. “One guy,” said Gemechu, “used to be Secretary of Economics in Iran.”

Any data collected on taxi or ride-hailing drivers in recent years has been scarce and unreliable — partly because of Uber and Lyft’s lack of transparency, and because a lot of the government data lumps app drivers in with traditional taxis. The Rideshare Guy, a blog on ride-hailing apps, does an annual survey of ride-hail drivers that provides some of the best income data available, but it’s not without flaws. All driver data is self-reported which leads to inaccuracies. Uber and Lyft have a notoriously tight grip on their own data, citing privacy and intellectual property concerns. Uber has collaborated with

researchers on studies, but only in cases where its chief economist Jonathan Hall co-authors the report.

An MIT study using The Rideshare Guy's 2017 survey found that 54 percent of Uber drivers made less than minimum wage, and eight percent lost money. This is all based on data that's far from airtight, though, and until the ride-hailing apps release their data for independent analysis, it'll be hard to fully trust studies on ride-hailing apps. What seems certain is that taxi drivers are losing money whether they resist the apps or join them. And immigrant drivers who rely on that income to support their families here and across the world will be among those hit hardest.

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For those deep in the heart of this fight for the taxi industry, it's hard to imagine what will happen if — or when — it disappears. Right now, the leadership at ATX Coop Taxi is still working hard to improve service and brand recognition, to advocate for drivers at city council and to build new connections and strengthen current ones with hospitals and hotels who regularly call taxis for their clientele. "There are still some opportunities for growth," said Mulatu. "The market is still there." He does admit, though, that many drivers have taken second jobs since business slowed.

Many, like Peter Oberheide who worked for Yellow Cab for nearly 25 years, have given up driving altogether. If the city had created incentives for cab companies to dispatch more efficiently years ago, he said, the taxis might've had a chance. "At this point it's too late. The taxi industry is just dead. I don't know if it's even worth saving." But Oberheide isn't an immigrant with remittances to send back home — he's a 48-year-old from Colorado who started driving in the '90s because it paid better than his restaurant job. When he quit driving earlier this year, he picked up a job in catering. "It sucks," he said. "You can't fight the future."

It's likely that many more drivers like Oberheide will have to start looking for alternative employment. But it's tough to imagine a job that would provide the same flexibility and income as taxi driving did, especially for immigrants. According to Gemechu, those who leave the taxi industry often switch to driving trucks or limousines, drive for the apps or get a job in manufacturing, like Guangul. Or they leave Austin for someplace cheaper.

More education is another option: Gemechu hopes to go back to school for mechanical engineering, but he worries about how he and his wife would pay for it. "I am not able to afford life if I go back to school," he said. Especially now. Earlier this year, Gemechu and Guangul had their first child, a baby girl named Rediet. Driving a taxi, Gemechu is able to take care of his daughter during the days while his wife is at work, and head out in the cab for the evenings. He admitted this isn't something that would happen in Ethiopia — the father taking care of an infant. But he's more than okay with it. "Having time with your baby — there is nothing exciting like that," he said.

Despite his worries about the taxi industry and his own job prospects, Gemechu believes that being in the U.S. is worth it because he knows he can raise his daughter here. Compared to the education opportunities and healthcare access in Addis Ababa, Gemechu says, "the system is very perfect here."

"I want her to be a doctor," said Gemechu, as Rediet babbled and cooed in the background. And if she inherits any of her parents' musical talent and interest, he said with a laugh, "I will do my best to see my dream in her life."

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Vita

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